

What's Your Name?

^{NRS} Act 9:1 Meanwhile Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest² and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any who belonged to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem.³ Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him.⁴ He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"⁵ He asked, "Who are you, Lord?" The reply came, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting."⁶ But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do."⁷ The men who were traveling with him stood speechless because they heard the voice but saw no one.⁸ Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing; so they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus.⁹ For three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.¹⁰ Now there was a disciple in Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, "Ananias." He answered, "Here I am, Lord."¹¹ The Lord said to him, "Get up and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul. At this moment he is praying,¹² and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him so that he might regain his sight."¹³ But Ananias answered, "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints in Jerusalem;¹⁴ and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who invoke your name."¹⁵ But the Lord said to him, "Go, for he is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel;¹⁶ I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name."¹⁷ So Ananias went and entered the house. He laid his hands on Saul and said, "Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on your way here, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit."¹⁸ And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored. Then he got up and was baptized,

“What’s in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet.” (Romeo and Juliet II, 2.1-2) What’s in a name? It’s funny how things change over time. This quote from Romeo and Juliet has become common to us. We say it whenever we’re trying to say that the name of something really isn’t that important. You say tomahto, I say tomato- no big deal. What’s in a name?

Of course this isn’t what this line actually means in the play. This is the famous scene when Juliet is at the window and Romeo is watching from down below. And she, a Capulet, is in love with him, a Montague- families that get along like ducks and

beavers during civil war weekend. And so she cries out- what's in a name? Not because names aren't important- but because they are SO important.

It's the same in the Bible. Names aren't just something to tell you apart from somebody else- names have meaning in the Bible. Names in the Bible say something about who someone is at the very deepest level. Moses is an Egyptian word meaning to be drawn out- because he was drawn out of the water. Jesus, *yeshua*, it means "God saves".

And when someone's identity changes- their name often changes with it. This is what we see in our texts for this morning- with Abram and Sarai transformed into Abraham and Sarah. And Saul turning into Paul.

Now sometimes, like with Abram and Sarai, our names are changed to acknowledge how we have already been transformed. God changes their names after they have already walked thousands of miles, over dangerous roads, and in lands they never known or even heard of. Journeys like this- they change us. And to honor this kind of transformation, God changes their name.

This happens today, too. In the backpacking community people get trail names- normally because of something that happens to them on the trail. I was just reading about two guys who were vying for setting the fastest yo-yo, or up and back of the continental divide trail. The guy who finished first is known as Mr. Magoo, because the guy stays calm no matter what was going on.

Believe it or not my own black lab, Rigby, has her own trail name, honoring a change she underwent when ol' Rob Ayers and I hiked the 41 miles around Mt. Hood on the Timberline trail a few summers back. On our second night the temperature

dropped, and poor Rigby being an inside dog woke me up because her shivering was shaking the tent. Not knowing what else to do I opened my emergency blanket, you know that metallic crinkly things, and I wrapped that around her. And that did the trick. In the morning after Rob and I were up, Rigby was still in her insulated haven, not wanting to move a muscle just letting allowing her face to poke out. Instantly, her trail name of Jiffy Pup was born- because she looked like she was wrapped up like jiffy pop popcorn.

So, sometimes we're given names to mark something important in our lives- or to honor that something has changed inside of us somehow.

But other times, other times, we are given names BEFORE we've actually changed. Sometimes our names are changed- and it takes us sometime to live into these new names.

This is how it was with Paul. Paul doesn't start out life as Paul, but as Saul. He was a devout Pharisee. He put tortured and murdered Christians whenever he had the chance- trying to keep his people pure. And then one day, he's walking along the road to Damascus, on his way to wipe out the Christian community there when he's struck down on the road, struck down by a blinding light. And on his knees he hears a voice saying to him, "Saul, why are you persecuting me?" It's the voice of Christ. And when Saul gets up he's blinded. But Jesus tells him to go into the city and there he will be told what to do. So he's led to the city. And there, Jesus sends to him a man named Ananias who heals Paul in Jesus' name. And when Paul stands up,

something like scales fall from his eyes. And right on the spot he is baptized. Right on the spot- he is transformed from Saul to Paul.

But...not exactly. One of the strangest things I noticed about this text this week, is that while Saul is baptized and receives his new name- he doesn't use it right away. In fact he isn't able to bring himself to utter it for quite awhile. In fact from chapter 9 of Acts all the way to chapter 13, which is like a lifetime in Biblical time, Saul can't bring himself to use his new name.

See, sometimes we're given a new name, but it takes us some time, maybe a lot of time, before we get comfortable with it.

This is how it is with marriage, I think. With marriage we receive a new name- we step into a new identity. But when we're standing there with our beloved, holding their hands, gazing into their eyes and saying things like "until death do us part" and "in sickness and in health" do we have any idea what we're saying? Do we have any idea of the octaves of joy and pain and wonder that lie ahead? Of course not. We receive a new name, but it will take us years before we even begin to live into it.

This is the way it is with Baptism I believe. When we baptized little Anna Grace this morning, she received a new name- and not just her given name, the beautiful name that Philip and Karen chose for her. She received the name that we all receive at baptism, when God lays his hands upon us, arcs toward us, looks us in the eyes, and says, "You, you, are my beloved. I choose you. With you I am well pleased." You are my beloved. I choose you. With you I am well pleased. We receive this new name at baptism, but it's a name we don't entirely understand or believe, isn't it.

You are God's beloved. With you God is well pleased. It's a name it takes us our entire lives to live into.

A couple of weeks ago I heard an interview with Alex Haley, the creator of *Roots*. And the interviewer was asking Haley if there was anything that surprised him or caught him by surprise when they adapted the book to the movie. And he said one central, crucial scene was just not working the way it was written, and it only worked when the actors were set free with it.

As so many of you remember *Roots* tells the story of Kunta Kinte, a young African warrior stolen from his tribe and taken aboard a slaveship to Maryland. The scene takes place when the master gives Kunta Kinte his slave name, his English name Toby. But Kunta Kinte refused it. And whenever anyone called him Toby, he wouldn't listen. And when they asked them his name, he replied, "Kunta Kinte."

Well, the master knew what was at stake. By refusing his new name, Kunta Kinte was refusing his new life as a slave. And if the other slaves saw this- it could mean rebellion.

And so the master has him dragged by horses through the mud. And after he's dragged, he is tied up, his arms high above his head. And the master yells out, "You've been given a new name. You're name is Toby. What's your name?" And he says, "Kunte Kinte." And he lashes him with the whip. Kinte's entire body shuddering. "What's your name?" the master shouts again. "Kunte Kinte", he roars back. (Whipping motion.) "Your name is Toby! What's your name?" "Kunta Kinte!" (Whipping motion. Whipping motion again three times.) And finally,

exhausted. And near death. He hangs his head, and says quietly, “My name’s Toby. My name is Toby.” Satisfied the master has him taken down.

But Louis Gosset Jr., playing Fiddler, he runs up to the boy and he cradles him in his arms. And he rocks him back and forth, the boys blood covering his hands. And he says to him, “Your name ain’t Toby. Your name is Kunta Kinte.”

You and I, we spend all week in a world determined to give us new names, names telling us we will be valuable if we produce, if we are strong, if we go along with what others think. We spend all week in a world that tells us we are lovable if we behave, or if we stay under 120 pounds.

This is why we come to this place. We come to this place because we know we have a name here- a name that will never be taken from us. Our name in this place is God’s beloved. And this name says God chooses you. This name says with you God is well pleased.

What’s in a name? Everything.

What’s your name? **Amen.**